

Cyber agency beefing up disinformation, misinformation team

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The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) is beefing up its disinformation and misinformation team in the wake of a divisive presidential election that saw a proliferation of misleading information online.

"I am actually going to grow and strengthen my misinformation and disinformation team," CISA Director Jen Easterly said during virtual remarks at the RE:WIRED conference on Wednesday.

Easterly noted that earlier this week she had a meeting with "six of the nation's experts" in the disinformation and misinformation space. She stressed her concerns around this being a top threat for CISA, which is charged with securing critical infrastructure, to confront.

"One could argue we're in the business of critical infrastructure, and the most critical infrastructure is our cognitive infrastructure, so building that resilience to misinformation and disinformation, I think, is incredibly important," Easterly said.



“We are going to work with our partners in the private sector and throughout the rest of the government and at the department to continue to ensure that the American people have the facts that they need to help protect our critical infrastructure,” she added.

Easterly’s comments came a year after CISA came under fire by President Trump for its efforts to push back against election misinformation and disinformation, primarily through setting up a “rumor control” website. Trump fired former CISA Director Chris Krebs, and several other top CISA officials were forced to resign in the weeks following the 2020 presidential election, largely as a result of this effort.

Despite the political pressure, the rumor control site remains up. Easterly pledged in September to continue using the page, and CISA did indeed use the rumor control site to counter election disinformation and misinformation during the recent 2021 elections in 30 states, including the closely watched Virginia governor’s race.

“We now live in a world where people talk about alternative facts, post-truth, which I think is really, really dangerous if you get to pick your own facts, and it’s particularly corrosive when you talk about matters of election security,” Easterly said Wednesday.

“There is a certain percentage of the American people that are not going to be convinced and are not going to listen to the government, we get that, but there is a certain part of the American public that do still trust the government and that do still come to us and that get facts about things that can be difficult to understand,” she said.

Microsoft President and Vice Chairman Brad Smith on Wednesday separately sounded the alarm about online disinformation and misinformation impacting issues including elections and COVID-19 vaccine rollout.

Smith specifically warned about the ability of foreign governments to use disinformation to meddle in another country’s affairs, an issue that became particularly concerning following Russian efforts to spread disinformation to sway the 2016 U.S. presidential election in favor of Trump.

“It has become in some ways almost a tool of choice to disrupt a democracy, to sow dissent, to cause people to question even fundamental facts like who won the election and is this vaccine safe, or does it work,” Smith said in a speech at the Sciences Po Paris School of International Affairs. “In some ways, it may be

far more effective, it's certainly less expensive, to launch a government-sponsored disinformation campaign than it is to build a hypersonic missile, and we have some countries that have the resources easily to do both."